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ABSTRACT

A short-term longitudinal study investigated theoretical perspectives on friends' influences and compared the influence of a student's closest friend with that of several close friends. Participants were 297 seventh and eighth graders in junior high schools in small towns or rural areas adjacent to a medium-sized city. Measures obtained in the fall and spring of a school year provided data on students' involvement in school, the frequency with which they were disruptive in class, names of their best friends, and positive and negative features of their friendships. Questions about positive features dealt with the friends' prosocial behavior and emotional support, and the intimacy of the friendships. Questions about negative features dealt with the frequency of conflicts and rivalry or unpleasant competition between friends. Students' English and mathematics teachers rated their involvement and disruptive behavior. Findings indicated that friends influence one another's attitudes and behavior so that the friends become increasingly similar over time. Adolescents' adjustment to school was affected by the features of their friendships. Correlations based on multiple friendships were often larger than those based on the closest friendship. Findings suggest that measures based on several friendships are more reliable than those based on one friendship, but researchers can expect to get comparable results from both types of measures. (RH)

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HOW FRIENDS INFLUENCE ADOLESCENTS' ADJUSTMENT TO SCHOOL

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ABSTRACT

Many theorists assume that adolescents are influenced by their friends' characteristics so that they gradually become more similar to their friends. Other theorists assume that adolescents benefit from having friendships with positive features. Both processes of influence were examined in a short-term longitudinal study. The study included 297 seventh and eighth graders. Measures of the students' friendships, their adjustment to school, and their friends' adjustment were obtained in the fall and the spring of a school year. Friends' similarity increased during the year, but not all increases were due to friends' influence on each other. Students whose friendships had more positive features and fewer negative features also improved in adjustment.

INTRODUCTION

Many theorists and researchers have assumed that adolescents are influenced by the attitudes and behavior of their friends. Several researchers have shown, for example, that adolescents whose friends have positive attitudes toward school improve over time in their own attitudes (e.g., Davies & Kandel, 1981; Epstein, 1983). Conversely, adolescents whose friends dislike school decrease over time in their adjustment to school. The net result of friends' influence, then, is increased similarity of the school adjustment of adolescents and their friends.

Other theorists and researchers focus on different processes of influence. They argue that adolescents' behavior and adjustment improve when they have friendships that are close, supportive, and harmonious. Piaget (1932/1965), for example, proposed that mutual respect among peers is critical for the development of a mature morality. Sullivan (1953) emphasized the importance of close friendships for the development of self-esteem and social understanding. More recently, many theorists have suggested that friendships or other close relationships provide support for people faced with stressful events and help them cope more effectively (e.g., Cohen & Wills, 1985). Still other researchers have argued that close and harmonious relationships with peers can improve adolescents' social and academic adjustment to school (e.g., Damon, 1984; Furman & Gavin, 1989). Direct tests of these hypotheses are rare, however.

PURPOSE

The purpose of our study was to examine both theoretical perspectives on friends' influence. We used a short-term longitudinal design to see if the similarity in friends' adjustment to school increased between the fall and the spring semesters of a school year. We also considered the stability of students' friendships, because an increase in friends' similarity can most confidently be taken as the result of friends' influence if students kept the same friends throughout the year. In addition, we used interviews with students to assess the features of their friendships. Then we examined the relations of friendship features to school adjustment in each semester. We also examined the relations of friendship features in the fall to changes in students' adjustment between semesters.

A secondary purpose of our study was to compare the influence of a student's closest friend with that of several close friends. In some studies of friends' influence, researchers used measures based on just one friendship. In other studies, researchers used measures based on multiple friends. We used both types of measures and examined the parallels between the findings for the two types.

METHOD

Subjects

The study included 297 students (194 girls and 103 boys) from the seventh and eighth grades in three junior high schools. The schools were in small towns or rural areas next to a medium-sized city. Most of the students were white.

Procedure

During the fall semester, small groups of students completed questionnaires that included questions about their involvement in school and the frequency with which they were disruptive in class. Sample questions are listed in Table 1. The students' English and math teachers also rated their involvement and their disruptive behavior.

Then the students named up to three best friends. Best-friend nominations were not restricted, but most students named friends who were the same sex and in the same grade at the same school. Next, students answered a standard set of questions about the positive features and negative features of these friendships. The questions about positive features dealt with the friends' prosocial behavior, their emotional support, and the intimacy of the friendships. The questions about negative features dealt with the frequency of conflicts and rivalry or unpleasant competition between friends. Table 1 also includes examples of these questions.

The same assessments were done near the end of the spring semester, about six months later. Because most students

named friends who were also participating in the study, we could match the friends' responses with students' responses. The matching was done twice. We first tried to match students with the friend they had named as their best or closest friend. Such a match was possible for 52% of the sample. Then we matched students with all the friends, up to three, whom they named who were participated in the study. Over 80% of the students in the sample could be matched with at least one close friend in this way, and most were matched with two or three friends. In a similar way, we created measures of the features of students' friendships both from their reports about their closest friendship and from their reports about up to three close friendships.

RESULTS

Friends' Similarity in the Fall and the Spring

The procedure for matching students' scores to their friends' scores allowed us to compute correlations for the actual similarity in adjustment between friends. Table 2 shows those correlations for the fall and the spring. Table 2 also indicates that the correlations for two measures, teacher-rated involvement and self-reported disruption, increased significantly between the fall and the spring. These increases are preliminary evidence for friends' influence on each other. They suggest that friends affected each other so that their involvement and disruptive behavior became more similar during the year.

A significant increase in a similarity correlation is only preliminary evidence for friends' influence, however. Also needed is information on the stability of students' friendships. The correlation for friends' similarity in self-reported disruptive behavior increased significantly during the year only when students kept the same friends throughout the year. The correlations for students with unstable friendships were nonsignificant in both semesters. This pattern suggests that students with stable friendships did become more similar to their friends in disruptive behavior because they influenced each other.

The correlations for friends' similarity in teacher-rated involvement increased significantly during the year only when students' friendships were unstable. The similarity correlations for students with stable friendships were significant in both

semesters and changed little during the year. This pattern suggests that friends became more similar in involvement because they ended friendships with classmates whose involvement differed from theirs and formed new friendships with classmates more similar to themselves. In other words, the increase in friends' similarity resulted from friend selection rather than friends' influence.

We also did multiple regression analyses in which each measure of school adjustment in the spring was a criterion variable, the same measure of adjustment in the fall was entered as the first predictor, and the corresponding measure of the friend's (or friends') adjustment in the fall was another predictor. When the analyses are done in this way, significant effects for the measure of friends' adjustment suggest that the friends' adjustment influenced the changes in students' adjustment during the year.

Table 2 shows that the multiple regression analyses yielded findings similar but not identical to those from the analyses of similarity correlations. The changes in students' adjustment during the year appeared to be influenced by their friends' involvement as rated by teachers, their friends' disruptive behavior as they reported it themselves, and their friends' grades.

Effects of Friendship Features

As Table 3 shows, students who described their friendships as having more positive features reported greater involvement in school and were rated by their teachers as more involved. Students who described their friendships as having more negative features were less involved and more disruptive, according to their self-reports. The measures of friendship features were not related to students' academic achievement judged by report-card grades.

Multiple regression analyses like those used to examine the influence of the friends' characteristics were done to examine the effects of friendship features on the changes in adolescents' adjustment during the year. Table 3 indicates when these analyses yielded significant effects. Students whose closest friendship in the fall had more positive features showed more positive changes in involvement during the year. This finding suggests that students who had better friendships also viewed their school experiences more favorably.

Students whose fall friendships had more negative features increased in their self-reported disruptive behavior during the year. A weak effect in the opposite direction was found for teacher ratings of students' disruption, but only for the measure of students' closest friendship. Because the simple correlations of this measure with teacher-rated disruption were nonsignificant, this result may be attributed to chance. The findings more strongly suggest that problems with friends are associated with, and contribute to, problem behavior at school.

CONCLUSIONS

1. Friends influence one another's attitudes and behavior so that they become more similar over time. But not all increases in friends' similarity result from their influence on one another. Adolescents may also drop old friends and make new friends who are more similar to themselves. Our findings suggest that friends became more similar in their disruptive behavior because they influenced one another's behavior. By contrast, friends became more similar in involvement as rated by teachers because they formed new friendships during the year with classmates whose involvement more closely matched theirs.

2. Adolescents' adjustment to school is related to, and affected by, the features of their friendships. Adolescents whose friendships are more intimate and supportive are more positively involved in school. Adolescents whose friendships are marred by conflicts and rivalry are more disruptive in school. Most theories of friendships focus primarily on their positive features. Our findings suggest that both the positive and the negative features of adolescents' friendships affect their adjustment.

3. We examined the influence of students' closest friendship and of up to three close friends. The correlations based on multiple friendships were often larger than those based on the single closest friendship. Even so, the patterns of correlations were similar. These findings suggest that measures based on several friendships are more reliable than those based on one friendship, but researchers can expect to get comparable results from the two types of measures.

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Table 1

Sample Items from the Measures of School Adjustment and Friendship

Measures	Items
School Adjustment	
Involvement (6 items)	How often do you take part in class discussions?
Disruption (6 items)	How often do you do things in class that cause you to get in trouble?
Grades	English and math teachers' records of most recent report-card grades
Friendship	
Positive features (12 items)	How often does this friend help you when you can't do something by yourself?
	How often do you tell this friend things about yourself that you wouldn't tell most kids?
Negative features (8 items)	How often do you get into arguments with this friend?
	How often does this friend try to boss you around?

Note. Students responded to all questions on 5-point scales ranging from never to very often.

Table 2
Similarity in Friends' Self-Reports, Teacher Ratings, and Grades in the Fall and the Spring

Measures	Closest Friends		Close Friends	
	Fall	Spring	Fall	Spring
Involvement				
Self-reported	.14	.27***	.14*	.26***
Teacher-rated[a]	.34***	.55***	.47***	.58***
Disruption				
Self-reported[a]	.09	.28***	.22**	.41***
Teacher-rated	.43***	.40***	.43***	.46***
Grades	.40***	.36***	.49***	.46***

Note. Correlations are underlined when multiple regression analyses suggested that friends' scores in the fall significantly affected the changes in students' scores between the fall and the spring.

[a]The differences between the correlations for fall and spring were significant for these measures, when tests for differences between dependent correlation coefficients were used.

*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

Table 3
Correlations between the Measures of School Adjustment and of Friendship Features in the Fall and the Spring

Adjustment measures	Closest Friendship				Close Friendships			
	Positive Features		Negative Features		Positive Features		Negative Features	
	Fall	Spring	Fall	Spring	Fall	Spring	Fall	Spring
Involvement								
Self-reported	.15*	.17**	-.14*	-.14*	.24***	.24***	-.11*	-.17**
Teacher-rated	.15**	.13*	-.01	.02	.21***	.20***	-.11*	-.04
Disruption								
Self-reported	-.02	-.00	.16**	.20**	-.06	-.08	.29***	.28***
Teacher-rated	-.01	.02	.06	.06	-.01	-.01	.17**	.06
Grades	.04	.03	.07	.03	.11	.08	-.05	.05

Note. Correlations are underlined when multiple regression analyses suggested that the features of students' friendships in the fall significantly affected the changes in their adjustment between the fall and the spring.

*$p < .05$ **$p < .01$ ***$p < .001$